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ABSTRACT

In the wake of increasing concern regarding school safety, state lawmakers will be faced with difficult decisions regarding statewide policies and the funding of local programs. To assist lawmakers with this process, this report provides an overview of the most prominent issues legislators may face, as well as a framework within which to address them. Despite recent attention to school safety concerns, research shows that the level of violence in schools has been decreasing since 1993. The difference is that today's violence has become more lethal, due to increasing incidents involving gunfire, fatalities, and multiple victims. School violence is not just a school problem but is an extension of the violence that occurs at home and within the larger community. Several aspects of a child's environment, emotional well being, or behavior have been identified as possible early warning signs of violent or delinquent behavior. Families, teachers, and school administrators who are trained to identify and respond to these factors may be able to intervene at critical times to prevent violence from occurring. A comprehensive approach is the key to effective violence prevention. It requires attention to child development; family and peer relationships; mental health treatment; conflict management; and access to weapons. (Contains 10 references.) (JDM)

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ED 449 389

National Conference of State Legislatures

# SCHOOL VIOLENCE

## 10 THINGS LEGISLATORS NEED TO KNOW

*By Julie Thomerson, Policy Associate*
*NCSL School Violence Project*

### *Introduction*

While school violence is not a new problem, recent school shootings have brought the issue to the forefront of political discussion, and legislative activity on this issue is expected to intensify in the 2000 session. In the wake of increased concern regarding school safety, state lawmakers will be faced with difficult decisions regarding statewide policies, including the funding and regulation of local programs.

To assist lawmakers in this difficult process, this report provides a broad overview of the most prominent issues that legislators face regarding school violence, as well as a framework within which to address them. Future National Conference of Legislatures' (NCSL) reports will provide more detailed information regarding specific issues. Contact NCSL for further assistance.

### *Schools are safe places*

Research shows that most schools are safe places, and that students often are safer at school than at home. According to the *1999 Annual Report on School Safety*, students have less than one chance in a million of dying at school, which is greater than their chance of being hit by lightning. At the same time, students between the ages of 12 and 18 are more likely to be victims of violent crime away from school than at school, and 11 children die every two days from family violence (see figure 1).

**10 Things . . .**

- Schools are safe places.
- School violence is not just a school problem.
- Research has identified factors that contribute to delinquent and violent behavior and increase the risk that it will happen.
- States and schools are implementing a variety of programs to deal with school violence; some have proven effective, some look promising, and others are ineffective.
- A comprehensive approach is the key to effective violence prevention and intervention.
- Legislators play a critical role in providing a statewide framework for addressing school and youth violence.
- Successful policies and programs require collaboration among lawmakers, human service agencies, law enforcement agencies, educators, local governments and the private sector.
- Addressing school and youth violence requires community solutions, including participation of students, parents, school officials and community leaders.
- Youth are affected by how society prevents and responds to violence, as well as by violence itself.
- We are still learning about "what works;" demand assessment and hold programs accountable.

Despite recent attention to school safety concerns, research shows that the level of violence in schools has been decreasing since 1993. The *1999 Annual Report on School Safety* indicates that the overall school crime rate has declined, and fewer students are carrying weapons or physically fighting on school grounds. The difference is that

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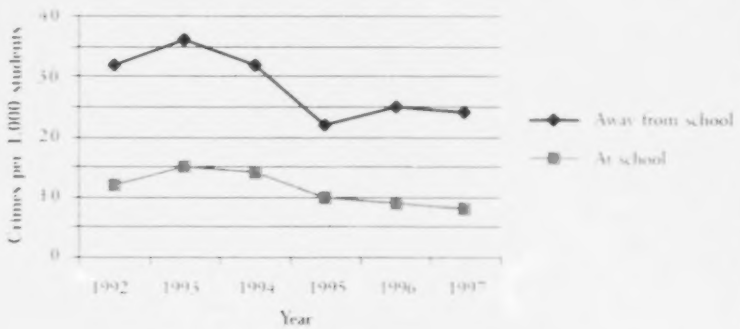
today's school violence has become more lethal, due to increasing incidents that involve gunfire, fatalities and multiple victims.

Legislators need to be cautious when examining statistics on school safety, since much of the research in this area often is unreliable. For example, some school violence measurements include suicides and acts committed by adults. In addition, current data regarding how safe students feel in school is inconsistent, due to varied school policies, peer culture and other environmental factors. State lawmakers therefore will want to ensure that school violence programs and policies are supported by accurate information about the nature, extent and scope of the problem in their states and communities.

**Figure 1. Serious Violent Crime Against Students Ages 12 Through 18 At and Away from School, 1992-1997**




Note: Serious violent crimes include rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault.
Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, 1992 to 1997.

## *School violence is not just a school problem*

School violence is not just a school problem, and it does not begin in schools. It is an extension of violence that occurs at home and within the larger community. According to the Centers for Disease Control, less than 1 percent of youth violence happens at school, and 90 percent of child homicide victims under age 12 are killed by adults. Kids are witnessing, experiencing and learning about violence at home and in their communities, and they are bringing it with them to school.

Research shows that environmental factors such as family violence, low socioeconomic status, low self-esteem, and other problems may contribute to violent or delinquent behavior and perpetuate the cycle of youth violence. The more these factors exist in a child's life, the more the child may be at risk for problem behavior. At the same time, at-risk youth are more vulnerable to events or ideas that inspire violence, such as peer conflict or racial hatred, making them more likely to react to such events with violence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and other research groups, the most effective interventions interrupt this cycle of violence and recognize the community as a major force in prevention. Experts also note that families and communities are the primary source for "protective" factors, such as solid family relationships, strong community ties, a positive peer environment, conflict management skills and healthy self esteem, which prevent or reduce violent behavior.

## *Research has identified factors that contribute to delinquent and violent behavior and increase the risk that it will happen*

Several aspects of a child's environment, emotional well-being or behavior have been identified as possible early warning signs of violent or delinquent behavior. Families, teachers and school administrators who are trained to identify and respond to these factors may be

equipped to intervene at critical times to prevent violence from occurring at school and elsewhere.

As a result, several organizations have developed a list of risk factors to aid in identifying at-risk youth and, ultimately, to prevent school violence (see figure 2). In 1998, President Clinton commissioned the National Association of School Psychologists to create a list; other lists have been created by organizations such as the National School Safety Center, the American Psychological Association, the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). All have conveyed similar information—that there may be cause for concern when a child exhibits behaviors such as uncontrolled anger, social isolation, disinterest in school, poor academic performance, expression of violence in drawings or writings, or persistent discipline problems.

**Figure 2. Factors to Help Identify At-Risk Youth**

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation
- Excessive feelings of rejection
- Feelings of being picked on or persecuted
- Being a victim of violence
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating or bullying behaviors
- History of discipline problems
- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug use and alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
- Serious threats of violence

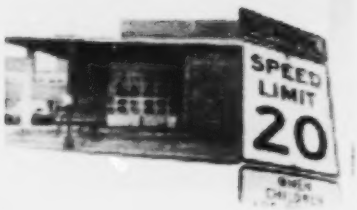
Source: National Association of School Psychologists, 1998

Experts from these organizations say that the negative effects of risk factors are cumulative and that a child who exhibits three or more is particularly vulnerable. However, the presence of any of these factors does not necessarily indicate that a child is dangerous. Instead, it may signal the need for attention and concern. Experts therefore caution against labeling or stigmatizing youth based solely on certain isolated behaviors.

## *States and schools are implementing a variety of programs to deal with school violence; some have proven effective, some look promising, and others are ineffective*

Since 1993, most states have implemented a variety of programs and policies to address school violence. The most common approaches include school security measures; violence prevention programs; sharing of information between schools and law enforcement agencies; and policies regarding access to firearms, criminal penalties and liability issues. Less common approaches include mental health interventions for at-risk youth, teacher training and after-school programming. Despite the variety of options available, most states have limited funding and must identify the most beneficial and cost-effective programs based on available information. Reliable research therefore can guide legislators as they make decisions about which policies and public expenditures are good investments for their states.

Current evaluation of school violence prevention programs is being conducted by a number of organizations. One of these organizations, the Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence, has identified effective violence prevention programs under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. Each program is well designed, has been demonstrated to be effective and can be implemented as part of a comprehensive school safety plan that involves the community. Several examples follow:




- *The BrainPower Program, California*—Curriculum designed to reduce aggression among students.

- *The Metropolitan Area Child Study, Chicago, Illinois*—Violence and substance abuse prevention program to enhance and support pro-social behavior and academic achievement.

- *Positive Adolescent Choices Training, Ohio*—Youth training to help reduce the risk that troubled adolescents will become perpetrators or victims of violence.

- *Think First, Wisconsin*—Anger and aggression management training for secondary students, including anger control and problem-solving skills.

- *The All Stars Program, North Carolina*—Ongoing curriculum to promote positive character development and discourage the onset of negative behaviors in young adolescents.

For more information about the Hamilton Fish National Institute on School and Community Violence, including model programs, visit the institute website at http://www.gwu.edu/~hfni/.

Another organization, the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, initiated its Blueprints program to identify violence prevention programs that are theoretically sound, have demonstrated a reduction in delinquent behavior and long-term effectiveness, and have been replicated at least once in another site. At this time, the center has identified 10 model programs from more than 450 tested, including five that are specifically school-based. School-based programs include the following.

- *PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies)*—Intervention curriculum to promote development of emotional competence in primary school children.

- *Bullying Prevention Program*—Curriculum to reduce victimization and bullying behaviors in primary and secondary school children.

- *Quantum Opportunities*—Provision of educational incentives and mentoring to at-risk, disadvantaged high school students.

- *Life Skills Training*—Drug use prevention through social skills and general life skills training in middle schools and junior high schools.

- *Midwestern Prevention Project*—Drug use prevention through social skills and general life skills training with components involving parents, the media and the community.

Non-school-based Blueprints programs include Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Nurse Home Visitation, Treatment Foster Care, Multi-systemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy. For more information about Blueprints programs, visit the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence website at http://www.colorado.edu/cspv.

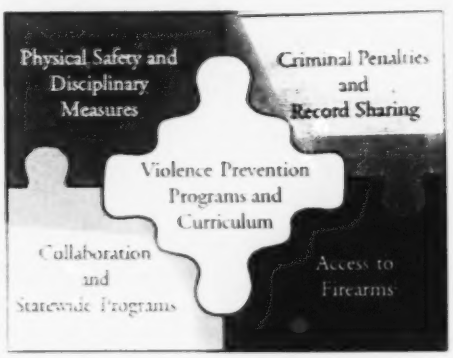
Other agencies that are conducting significant evaluations include the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control.

Knowing which programs do not work is just as important as knowing which ones do. Without this information, significant public investments could be made in programs that have no proven track record (see page 8). For example, very little research is currently available regarding the effectiveness of specific security measures such as metal detectors, video surveillance or random searches when used independently as deterrents to school violence. In general, most experts recommend a balanced approach that might include violence prevention programs, interventions with at-risk youth or organized crisis response, in addition to physical safety measures.

## *A comprehensive approach is the key to effective violence prevention and intervention*

Multiple factors contribute to the phenomenon of school violence, making it resistant to single, isolated approaches or short-term solutions. Thus, experts agree that a comprehensive approach is the key to effective violence prevention, requiring attention to multiple factors such as child development, family and peer relationships, mental health treatment, conflict management, and access to weapons. Broad, systemic approaches also require sustained involvement and commitment from major sectors of society, such as family, faith organizations, community agencies, law enforcement agencies, mental health professionals, teachers and school administration (see figure 3).

**Figure 3. Pieces of a Comprehensive Approach to Effective Violence Prevention**


Physical Safety and Disciplinary Measures
Criminal Penalties and Record Sharing
Violence Prevention Programs and Curriculum
Collaboration and Statewide Programs
Access to Firearms

Implementation of a comprehensive approach requires coordination of existing, individual policies and programs within a clearly defined framework. Some states have created mechanisms to coordinate individual efforts and facilitate unified policy approaches. Other states have incorporated different components in separate legislation or created state-level safety centers to serve as resources for schools and communities. For example, the Kentucky Safe Schools Act created a Center for School Safety to collect and disseminate information about school violence, distribute grants to local programs and develop statewide disciplinary guidelines. Similarly, North Carolina created the Center for the Prevention of School Violence to study and disseminate information regarding school safety issues and provide grant funds to local school districts for coordinated juvenile crime intervention and prevention programs.

## *Legislators play a critical role in providing a statewide framework for addressing school and youth violence*

Legislators play a critical role in addressing school violence. Many argue that the role of the legislature is to provide a statewide framework for local policies and programs, including broad parameters and funding incentives for local authorities to design effective, community-based approaches. By filling this role, the legislature can define state priorities and provide opportunities for communities to determine their own needs, without imposing unnecessary state control or generic solutions.

Lawmakers can ensure a statewide, broad-based approach to school violence by assessing current state policies to identify areas where legislative action may be needed. One approach might be to review existing laws and programs to identify any gaps or needed



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changes in current policies or funding. For example, Tennessee requires its school safety center to collect and analyze data on school-related violence, and to authorize grants to local agencies to implement needed programs. Statewide policies can provide valuable uniformity, guidance or incentives to local authorities designing school safety approaches, although many school safety and violence prevention programs do not require express legislative authorization.

Legislators also can play a key role in shaping policy by knowing what is happening in their own legislative districts, defining important local leadership roles, and involving community leaders in determining appropriate responses. For example, Kansas recently incorporated community planning in major juvenile justice reform, allowing communities to design strategies based on local values, assets and needs.

Additionally, policymakers can help give state attention to specific local problems. For example, trauma counseling may be needed for victims of violent incidents, and resources are not always available locally to provide these services. Knowledge of local programming therefore helps legislators to determine the types of policies or programs that need to be created at the state level or supported through state funds.

### *Successful policies and programs require collaboration among lawmakers, human service agencies, law enforcement agencies, educators, local governments and the private sector*

School violence is a complex problem that requires complex solutions. Thus, successful policies and programs require collaboration among lawmakers, human service agencies, law enforcement agencies, educators, local governments and the private sector. By sharing knowledge and expertise, professionals and public officials can enhance each other's knowledge about school violence and develop more effective interventions and prevention approaches.

Policymakers can take advantage of diverse professional expertise and promote collaboration in various ways. Some states, such as Missouri, give funding priority to collaborative projects. Kansas requires the state board of education to make awards to school districts to implement mental health support services in schools through collaboration with community mental health centers. Other states have authorized schools and law enforcement professionals to develop gang prevention or gun safety programs. Minnesota, for example, implemented a pilot program to train police officers to teach gang resistance in middle schools. Other collaborative projects might include local partnerships to provide mentoring, after-school programs, peer mediation training or conflict management workshops.

Lawmakers can provide incentives for local agencies to work together. For example, California provides funding to school districts that establish cooperative arrangements with law enforcement agencies. School safety programs can be costly, and many school districts lack the funds or leadership to develop effective approaches. The private sector can play a critical role in state collaboration by providing numerous—often untapped—resources for children and families. Examples of effective national programs include Big Brothers Big Sisters and Boys and Girls Clubs of America. Other programs include faith-based or non-

profit organizations or local business initiatives. By encouraging local collaboration, legislators therefore can increase the availability and depth of local programming.

## *Addressing school and youth violence requires community solutions, including participation of students, parents, school officials and community leaders*

Contributing factors and causes of school violence can vary greatly among different communities, calling for responsive solutions that are specific to individual communities, populations and problems. The most effective way that legislators can ensure this level of responsiveness is to involve local citizens in assessing and addressing local issues. In addition to their key roles in implementing local measures, community leaders, school officials, parents and other citizens can provide valuable information and insight into solutions that are appropriate to their specific environment. Communities are powerful networks of support, change and information, and everyone benefits when they partner with legislators to address school violence.

Because youth have the most to gain from effective responses to school violence, they can also be valuable partners in identifying, explaining and developing responses to problems. According to the National Institute of Justice, involving students in solving problems of school violence can reduce crime and fear among students. In addition, some evidence exists that school violence curricula may be more effective when students are included in planning and implementation. In order to use this resource and allow students to feel ownership in solutions, legislators can include youth in task forces, advisory councils or committees, or support youth-developed violence prevention programs. For example, a school violence task force in the legislative district containing Littleton, Colorado, encourages youth leadership and involvement. At the federal level, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention has developed a National Youth Network to gather and disseminate information about planning school violence programs to youth around the country via its "Youth in Action" newsletter.

**Figure 4. Examples of People Who Can Help**

- Legislators
- City council members
- Other elected officials
- District superintendents
- School board members
- Principals
- Teachers
- Counselors
- Coaches
- School nurses
- Security officers
- Students
- Community residents
- Siblings
- Parents
- Police
- Probation officers
- Judges
- Mayors
- Volunteers
- Parent-teacher association leaders
- Community/professional agencies and societies
- Local nonprofit groups
- Religious groups
- State and federal agencies
- Businesses
- Colleges and universities
- Health and social service agencies
- Media
- Sports/recreation/parks
- Youth-serving organizations
- Chambers of commerce

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, NCSL, 1999.

## *Youth are affected by how society prevents and responds to violence, as well as by violence itself*

Legislators no doubt are aware that exposure to violence and its aftermath can affect youth in many different ways, and that school support services may be a valuable resource in violence prevention. Chronic exposure to violence can produce depression, anxiety, stress, anger, substance abuse, inability to focus, academic failure, and an increased likelihood of violent behavior. In schools where violence is common, many youth stay home from school because they are afraid, and those who do attend classes have difficulty concentrating. In such environments, students may benefit both emotionally and academically from the

increased presence of school counselors, mental health professionals and law enforcement personnel.

Legislators also may want to consider the potential effects of violence prevention measures on the school environment. While common security measures may be a valuable element of school violence prevention, critics note that they may interfere with student feelings of well-being and safety. They argue that methods used to protect schools may also contribute to a climate of fear by providing a false sense of security, sending the message that schools are not safe or that adults are afraid of students. Just as they respond negatively to violence in schools, research shows that youth are less productive when they feel unsafe, regardless of the presence of real danger.

Civil rights organizations also have questioned the constitutionality of security measures such as restrictive dress codes, video surveillance, random locker searches or zero tolerance policies. Courts have upheld these measures as reasonable, yet critics argue that such policies may go too far when they lead to suspensions for students who have dyed hair or body piercings, carry prescription medicine or wear religious symbols. The U.S. Supreme Court stated that students do not necessarily "leave their Constitutional rights at the school door" (*Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969), and many of these policies have raised questions about the degree to which student rights can be restricted in the name of school safety. Courts currently address each case individually, balancing the school board's right to maintain a safe environment against the individual rights of the student.

### *We are still learning about "what works;" demand assessment and hold programs accountable*

Although it is not a new issue, we are still learning about school violence—the factors that cause or contribute to it, as well as the programs and policies that may prevent it in the future. High-profile school shootings have brought the issue to the forefront of political discussion, and more efforts are being made to evaluate it as a societal problem. Because school violence can be attributed to various factors that often occur over long periods of time, more long-term research and assessment of programs are needed to begin to address unanswered questions and inform future policy decisions.

Despite the numerous approaches that states, school districts and community agencies have taken to address school violence, very little research has been done to demonstrate which programs and policies actually work. Because of the nature of school violence, many organizations may be more motivated to spend time doing something than to find out if what they are doing is effective. Without such information, however, communities and governing bodies risk investing in programs that do little to prevent violence and actually may cause harm. For example, recent state and local evaluations of two popular programs —D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and juvenile boot camps—indicate that these programs are often ineffective in reducing youth risk behaviors or delinquency.

To be dependable, research must be scientific and objective and articulate outcomes; most current information regarding school violence prevention programs, however, is based on

student, parent or teacher surveys. While survey information is valuable for some purposes, rigorous scientific evaluation provides more reliable information about effective programs and policies. Legislators can ensure that their investments are worthwhile by funding scientific research or requiring assessments from programs that already are funded by the state. This information can be used to better inform schools, school districts and the public about approaches that really work, as well as to provide the data needed to support private funding proposals. Additionally, legislators can provide funding to replicate programs that have proven effective in communities or populations with similar problems.

## *Conclusion*

During the past decade, state legislatures have paid careful attention to the issue of school violence, with at least 20 states passing new laws promoting school safety during 1998 and 1999. Legislative activity is expected to intensify in the 2000 sessions, following last year's school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, and Conyers, Georgia.

Recognizing the complexity of the issue, state legislatures currently address school violence in various ways. More common approaches—such as enhanced security measures and disciplinary codes—have been adopted in many states, and others are looking for additional ways to prevent crime on school grounds. State legislatures are also acknowledging the importance of responding to risk factors, such as mental health issues and peer conflict, and collaborating with community agencies to provide needed services.

As concern for this issue grows, state legislators continue to address school violence with diligence and innovation, designing programs and policies to deal with school violence within a broader context and acknowledging that school violence is not just a school problem.

NCSL recently initiated a School Violence Project within its Children and Families and Education programs to provide immediate support and information to state legislatures regarding school violence issues. The project draws on conference-wide expertise in many issue areas—such as public health, mental health and juvenile justice—to provide legislators with information about comprehensive strategies to address school violence. Project goals include:

- Providing information and technical assistance to legislators and legislative staff on school violence;
- Assisting legislators to develop comprehensive, cross-jurisdictional approaches to school violence;
- Facilitating communication between state legislative committees, policymakers, state and local leaders and national policy experts; and
- Developing leadership capacity on school violence issues within state legislatures.

For further assistance or information about school violence, contact Julie Thomerson at NCSL: (303) 830-2200, extension 245 (telephone) or julie.thomerson@ncsl.org (email).



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# SCHOOL VIOLENCE

## 10 THINGS LEGISLATORS NEED TO KNOW



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